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ABSTRACT

Parallel designs were used to test the hypotheses that (1) strongly assertive forms would be attributed relatively more often to females, and (2) syntactic forms associated with males would be rated more intelligent and those associated with females less so. The results of the study were consistent with each of these predictions, suggesting that previously reported "changes in attitudes" toward women over the past decade may have been more a function of changes in the social desirability of expressing antifeminist prejudices than of changes in the attitudes themselves. (Author)

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Stereotypes of male and female speech

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Lakoff (1973) suggested that women are perceived as expressing themselves in more tentative, less assured ways than men. She predicted that differences would be especially evident in beliefs about the use of tag questions, phrases that convey no specific information but decrease the strength of assertions. Where a man might make the strong assertion, "The war in Vietnam is terrible," a like-minded woman would be expected to say "The war in Vietnam is terrible, isn't it?" However, Lakoff provided no empirical evidence; a major purpose of the present investigation was to test her prediction that statements in the form of tag questions would be more often attributed to female speakers than the identical statements phrased as strong assertions.

A related issue concerns whether statements are evaluated differently according to the sex of the speaker. Goldberg (1968) found that female college students consistently rated published articles credited to women lower than the identical articles credited to men. More recently, though, Baruch (1972) failed to replicate Goldberg's finding; the scores assigned to male and female "authors" by college women in this sample were not significantly different. Baruch's explanation was that "major changes occurred in social attitudes" during the four year

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interval between the two studies (1972, p. 37).

Rather than reflecting true changes in attitudes, however, Baruch's finding may have been an artifact of changes in the social desirability of expressing anti-feminist opinions. That is, the negative stereotypes toward females' speech may have remained constant, but the social desirability of overtly expressing them could have diminished. One way to test this hypothesis would be to use a between subjects design in which some subjects would be asked to evaluate the quality of statements while others would be asked to judge whether the statements had been made by men or women. If one sample judged particular statements as indicative of the speakers' low intelligence, and a parallel group indicated that the statements were probably those of women, it could be inferred that changes in the social desirability of expressing prejudices against women underlay the differences between Baruch's and Goldberg's findings. On the other hand, if differences in the rated intelligence of statements did not parallel differences in attributions of the statements to men and women, then Baruch's explanation of changes in attitudes would be supported.

The above proposed strategy was followed in the present study; one group of college students was presented a list of sentences and asked to decide whether each statement had been made by a male or a female, while a second group was presented the same statements and asked to evaluate the intelligence of the speaker. From Lakoff's analysis, it was expected that sentences phrased as tag questions

would be attributed to women more often than the identical sentences phrased as strong assertions. Additionally, it was expected that modified assertions of the form "The war in Vietnam must be terrible," intermediate in the amount of confidence implied, would also be intermediate in the consistency of attribution to women. Finally, based in part on Kramer's (1973) findings that magazine cartoons portray women as lacking knowledge on intellectual topics, it was predicted that sentence types associated with women would be rated as less intelligent than those associated with men.

Method

Design and participants

Separate 4 (Type of sentence: strong assertion, modified assertion, tag question, or control) X 2 (Sex of subject) factorial designs were employed. In one design, subjects were asked to judge the sex of the speaker; in the other, they were asked to judge the intelligence of the statements. Subjects from each were asked to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each statement. Participants were 48 male and 48 female students from two introductory personality classes at the University of Illinois.

Task and materials

Three test forms, each presented to equal numbers of subjects, were employed. The forms consisted of 16 sentences: four strong assertions (e.g., Professional football is a bloodthirsty game); four modified assertions (e.g., Professional football must be a bloodthirsty game); four tag questions (e.g., Professional football is a bloodthirsty game,

isn't it); and four neutral controls (e.g., We went to the zoo last week). Where an item appeared on one test form as a strong assertion, it was a tag question in the same position on the second form and a modified assertion in that position on the third. The neutral controls were written as simple, unevaluatable statements of fact on all three forms. They served as a lie-truth index since subjects could not have an honest opinion about their truth or falsity. In the seven cases where subjects did not check the neutral blank on the agree-disagree scale on at least two of these four sentences, their test forms were not included in the statistical analyses (these seven subjects were replaced by others from the same classes).

One-half of the subjects given each of the three forms rated the sentences on a seven point scale ranging from 1 (male speaker) to 7 (female speaker). The other subjects rated the quality of the identical sentences on a seven point scale from 1 (bright) to 7 (dumb).

Procedure

Subjects in the first design were told that they were participating in a study aimed at discovering how accurately people can determine the sex of a speaker from specific statements. They were then instructed:

> The following list of sentences was selected from a recent series of taped conversations between college students. Your job is to indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement. The more strongly that you agree with a statement, the nearer your check should be to

the words "strongly agree." Likewise, the more strongly that you disagree with a statement, the nearer your check should be to the words "strongly disagree." If you have no opinion, check the middle blank.

In addition your job is to guess whether a man or a woman made each statement regardless of whether you agree or disagree with it. The more certain you are that a man said a sentence, the nearer your check should be to the word "man." The more certain you are that a woman said a sentence, the nearer your check should be to the word "woman." On some of these statements you may not have an opinion. If so, please check the middle blank.

Subjects in the second design were told that the goal of the experiment was to find which kinds of utterances are associated with bright people and which kinds are associated with dumb ones. They were provided the same instructions concerning the agreement-disagreement ratings task and then were told:

In addition, regardless of whether you agree or disagree with the opinion expressed, your job is to guess the intelligence of the speaker of each statement. The more intelligent you believe the person was who made a particular statement, the closer your check should be to the word "bright." Likewise, the less intelligent you believe the person was who made a particular statement, the closer your check should be

to the word "dumb." On some of these statements you may not have an opinion. If so, please check the middle blank.

Results

Separate 4 (Type of sentence: strong assertion, modified assertion, tag question, or control) X 2 (Sex of subject) analyses of variance were used to determine whether subjects attributed different sentence types to men and women and whether they attributed different sentence types to intelligent and unintelligent people.

Attribution of sentence types to males and females. Analyses of responses on the male-female scale revealed a significant main effect for type of sentence ($F = 3.44$, $df = 3,138$, $p<.05$), but not for sex of subject ($F = 2.46$, $df = 1,46$, $p>.10$) or for the interaction of the two variables ($F< 1$). As shown in Table 1a, the direction of findings was in complete accord with Lakoff's theory, with tag questions most often attributed to women, modified assertions occupying an intermediate position, and strong assertions most often attributed to men; a Newman-Keuls test indicated that the difference between attributions of strong assertions and tag questions was significant ($p< .05$).

Insert Table 1 about here

Ratings of intelligence of statements. Analyses of responses on the intelligence scale revealed a tendency toward differences among

sentence types ($F = 2.32$, $df = 3,138$, $p < .10$); no significant effect for sex of respondent or for the interaction of the two variables was apparent ($F < 1$). The direction of findings was comparable to that obtained with the male-female scale, if "bright" is substituted for "male" and "dumb" for "female". Strong assertions, associated with males, were rated as indicating the highest intelligence; tag phrases, associated with females, were thought to indicate the least intelligence; modified assertions occupied an intermediate position on both scales (Table 1b). These results suggested that changes in the social desirability of expressing anti-female prejudices, rather than substantive attitudinal shifts, accounted for the discrepancy between Goldberg's (1968) and Baruch's (1972) findings.

The strategy employed in this experiment suggests several applications for future research. For example, similar tests could be constructed to compare attitudes toward the speech of Blacks and Whites or Christians and Jews. By asking one group of subjects to evaluate the quality of a statement and a second, parallel group to judge who was likely to have said it, social pressure is reduced and the data may more validly reflect attitudes.

Table 1

Means of responses on Male-Female and Bright-Dumb scales.

Sentence type	Males	Females	Males and Females
A. Male-Female scale,	1 = male	7 = female	
Tag question	4.41	4.81	4.61
Modified assertion	4.22	4.18	4.20
Strong assertion	4.07	4.23	4.15
B. Intelligence scale,	1 = bright	7 = dumb	
Tag question	4.15	4.26	4.21
Modified assertion	4.01	4.02	4.02
Strong assertion	3.76	3.88	3.82

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